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This chapter describes the methodology of the Theater of the Oppressed as developed by Augusto Boal along with examples of its application.

Democratic Process and the Theater of the Oppressed

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For more than forty years, the Theater of the Oppressed (TO), founded by the Brazilian cultural revolutionary and popular educator Augusto Boal, has been serving oppressed communities the world over as a powerful tool for building community and organizing for direct democracy (Picher, 2006). TO embodies the concept of theater as political act—both a transfer of cultural power to the oppressed and a *rehearsal for revolution* (Boal, 1985). “All the truly revolutionary theatrical groups,” says Boal (1985), “should transfer to the people the means of production in the theater so that the people themselves may utilize them” (p. 122).

Aesthetic Education for Liberation

Within the framework of the poetics of TO, the aesthetic or artistic function of theater is dialectically connected to its pedagogical function (Boal, 2006). TO highlights theater not as spectacle but rather as a learning process that fosters critical thinking. Specifically, TO is understood as a practice consistent with Paulo Freire’s approach to liberatory education—namely, aesthetic education that promotes a transformative model of learning based on dialogue. In TO, this dialogue is brought about through creation of a playful environment in which people express, analyze, and collectively change images of their reality according to their desires (Boal, 1998). Play structures are accordingly designed to activate a problem-posing learning process where participants examine and analyze their reality. First

they create images based on their own direct experiences; then they analyze the power relations and root causes of the oppression expressed within those images; and finally they act to transform the situation according to their vision of possible alternatives. TO thus involves itself in the struggle to change consciousness; it engages the oppressed in a dialectical process of understanding the ideology of oppression and of creating new ideologies based on their desires.

Aesthetic education transcends art for art's sake, for it contributes to creating a participatory culture that promotes the right of everyone to fully participate in the organization, maintenance, and transformation of daily life. In addition, it helps develop the necessary capacities for that participation (Boal, 2006). TO is an intentional walk toward what in Latin American popular movements is known as *horizontalidad*, that is, equality in decision making, as well as development of the consciousness and capacities needed to practice equality (Sitrin, 2006).

In TO, theory and practice form an integrated system; they constitute a *praxis* that is rooted in the struggle to change consciousness, and this struggle emerges as the art of organizing for direct democracy by using direct democracy. Let us examine this system more closely.

The Theory

The theory of TO rests on six basic tenets. First, we as human beings are by definition creators; we are inherently artists and actors who organize and transform our surroundings (Boal, 2006). The second tenet is an extension of the first: we are also inherently "theater," in terms of social consciousness and social interaction. On the one hand, as conscious beings we play the roles of actor *and* spectator, or observer, of ourselves; on the other, we are engaged in developing our innate capacity for dialogue with ourselves and with others. We thus engage in a dialectic of action and reflection, acting on and transforming our environment and simultaneously transforming ourselves, because we are part of that environment. Boal refers to this dimension of our humanity as "essential theater" (Boal, 2002).

The third tenet introduces an egalitarian ethos: it is the responsibility of society to help all people develop their innate capacity for creativity, consciousness, and dialogue. The use of direct participatory democracy is the most effective means to achieve this (Boal, 2006). The fourth is concerned with the ethical poverty of capitalist society. The global market economy, which transforms natural resources and landbases into private property to generate monetary profit, destroys people and the environment. Characterized by the concentration of political, social, and economic power, as well as by hierarchical structure, which are all fundamentally antithetical to direct democracy, the market economy is exceedingly dehumanizing, inhibiting the development of full human potential (Boal, 1998).

The fifth tenet considers the hegemony of bourgeois ideology as a system of political positions, educational theories, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. It takes into account the flexibility of this ideology to perpetuate itself and capitalism. The dominant ideology validates exploitation and domination, for example, by making them appear natural and necessary (Boal, 2006). More important, we all “carry” capitalism within ourselves; that is, we ideologically internalize it. The sixth and final tenet proposes that transforming images of reality according to our desires and dreams is in itself a transformative act.

Confronted by the intellectual domination of art and education by the ruling elites, TO takes a militant stand: it challenges bourgeois theory and cultural practices by engaging in a battle around culture. Boal conceives of and practices TO as a *martial art*, whose primary function is to serve simultaneously as a weapon of resistance against oppression and a tool for creating a transformative culture.

The guiding ethical imperative expressed by Boal in his *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* consists of (1) rejection of the ideology of political “neutrality” that dominates education and the arts; (2) affirmation of the inherent political function of art; and (3) action, the creation of an oppositional and emancipatory model of theater based on democratic principles—theater of, by, and for the oppressed who are fighting back and creating a new society. In practice, this model of aesthetic education consists of transferring to oppressed communities knowledge about the means of production in theater: “how to” as well as “what” and “why,” “for whom” and “for what purpose” (Boal, 2006, pp. 44–51). Thus the collective lack of democratic experience is overcome by breaking with the behavior of nonparticipation.

As the practice of theater is demystified and made accessible, it becomes possible for ordinary people to free themselves from the *ideology of expertise*. They rediscover and validate their own capacity for becoming actors in their own lives. Within the TO model, aesthetic education gives people the opportunity to engage, on their own terms, in a learning process where they use all available resources, including human ones, to transform their own existence as well as empower their communities.

The Practice

TO's practice can be described in terms of method and technique.

The Method. The Paulo Freire methodology frames TO's practice of aesthetic education. Its basic problem-posing steps are to see (*and hear and feel*), to analyze, and to act. Each step in turn embodies three propositions about the nature of the real world and is diametrically opposed to the dominant ideology of fragmentation: (1) in the real world, each person is an indivisible whole whose sensations, movements, ideas, emotions, and beliefs do not merely interact with one another but are *interwoven* with one

another; (2) all ideas and mental images reveal themselves physically, that is, the psychic and physical realms are connected and overlap; (3) all five senses are linked (Boal, 2002).

Based on such humanist principles, the TO method sets in motion concepts, processes, and play structures that support the dynamics of egalitarian participation and transformation needed for people to learn theatrical production. For example, theater is emphasized as both a fundamental human activity (essential theater) and as the art of framing, examining, and playing with what we do naturally every day. The language of theater is correspondingly emphasized as something accessible to everyone. Moreover, all aesthetic activities are participatory, interactive, and improvised by participants from their direct experience of daily life. Core activities include a repertory of *exercises* (physical, muscular monologues), *games* (physical dialogues with or without words), and *techniques* (more complex structures based on a theme, or problem to be analyzed and transformed). Finally, the totality of activities make up what Boal (2006) calls a “subjunctive” theater, that is, a theater designed to question values and structures.

The Techniques. The main TO techniques are invisible theater, image theater, forum theater, and legislative theater (Boal, 2002).

Invisible theater is a skit performed in open public spaces as a real-life situation, whose goal is to stimulate civic dialogue. Ideally, the public is not aware that a “play” is unfolding.

Image theater is a repertory of games and techniques that emphasize physical dialogues, nonverbal imagery, consensus-building and problem-solving processes, and techniques for developing awareness of both objective and internalized forms of oppression. Here, the body is used to create images that help participants explore power relations and group solutions to concrete problems.

An innovative approach to community dialogue, *forum theater* is rooted in the Brazilian social justice movements of the 1950s and 1960s. It is essentially a dialogue process that begins in workshop and continues as performance to include new people. Forum theater analyzes situations of conflict involving objective, external (as opposed to internalized) oppression, in which an appropriate action to be taken is not immediately clear. Themes for development are suggested by workshop participants, who then tell actual personal stories of unresolved conflicts stemming from political or social problems of difficult solution. Skits depicting those conflicts are improvised and presented to an audience. Each story represents the perspective of an oppressed protagonist actively engaged in implementing a strategy for resolving a conflict; the protagonist's original strategy to resolve the conflict failed, however. When the skit is over, the audience discusses the strategy that was presented, and then the scene is performed once more. But now, audience members are urged to intervene by stopping the action, coming on stage to replace actors, and enacting their own strategies for resolving the conflict.

Thus, instead of remaining passive spectators the audience becomes a group of active “spect-actors” involved in creating alternative solutions and thus controlling the dramatic action. The aim of the forum is not to find an ideal solution but to invent new ways of confronting oppression.

Legislative theater is an expansion of forum theater in the political arena of legislation (1998). It was developed by Boal during his tenure as a member of the Rio de Janeiro City Council (1993–1997). It seeks to involve people and communities directly in the process of writing laws and formulating public policy.

The Method in Action

TO's method of aesthetic education is based on a web of processes that embody dialectical principles of participation and transformation. Like multiple self-reflecting mirrors, these processes are integrated into the structure of every activity (Boal, 2002). The core processes are *dialogue* and the *primacy of process over product*. From these two flow others, including (1) the logic of moving from the simple to the more complex; (2) improvisation; (3) “dynamization,” or animation of static images through movement, sound, and words in relationship to other images, in view of mobilizing desires; (4) scrutinizing direct experience, and seeking to reveal contradictions within images and discussions of real life; (5) the dialectical relationship between the individual and the collective; (6) communication based on seeing and hearing others, reciprocity and openness to change; (7) sympathy, or “reciprocal empathy” (Boal, 1995); (8) horizontal and cooperative leadership models; (9) dialectical integration of actors and spectators into spect-actors; and (10) collective strategizing to confront and eradicate oppression.

Let us examine how these processes function in a few typical activities.

Game: Colombian Hypnosis. Description: the group breaks down into pairs; one person is a leader and the other a follower. The follower's eyes are fixated on the palm of the leader's hand (leaders are responsible for the safety of their partners). There are three steps: (1) with one hand, leaders silently guide their partners in movement very slowly through the space. (2) After a few minutes, leader and follower exchange roles. (3) Finally, both hypnotize each other simultaneously. After the game, partners discuss with one another what they experienced and observed, and what skills were activated. Variations on this exercise include groups of three, and the whole group simultaneously leading and following (Boal, 2002).

The dynamics of collaboration and consensus are built into the structure of this group integration game. As participants help their partners focus on body language and expand their range of movement, they coordinate patterns, practice cooperation, and build trust. Emphasis can be placed on developing the capacity to practice horizontal forms of leadership, based on open, two-way dialogue.

Image Theater Game. The most basic is Complete the Image. Description: (1) two actors silently improvise a static image by shaking hands; the group then projects meanings onto the image by free association. (2) Each actor in turn steps out of the image and then returns with a new body position. (3) One by one, observers replace one character and then the other, each time inventing a new way to complete the existing image by positioning their own bodies differently. (4) The group repeats the process, without projecting meanings, in groupings of two, three, or more (Boal, 2002).

In this game, an “embodied” metaphor of the Freirian problem-posing steps, participants (1) explore the language of images, that is, images as surfaces that reflect multiple meanings projected onto them; (2) reflect on the relation among perception, perspective, and meaning; (3) shift perspectives and begin to modify patterns of perception; and (4) practice transforming situations by means of body juxtaposition and repositioning.

The whole method of Theatre of the Oppressed, and particularly of the image theater series, is based on the multiple mirror of the gaze of others—a number of people looking at the same image, and offering their feelings and what is evoked for them. This multiple reflection reveals to the person who made the image its hidden aspects (Boal, 2002).

Image Theater Technique. Let us pick the Image of Transition from the Real to the Ideal. Description: (1) participants “sculpt” an image of a real problem common to all, using as many characters as needed; the final form of the image is chosen by consensus. (2) Observers describe the formal qualities of the image and then project onto it subjective meanings. (3) Observers resculpt the same characters into an image of the ideal situation—a possible desired “real” that has not yet materialized; the final form of the image is also decided by consensus. (4) One by one, observers modify the initial image by creating images of possible transitions from the real to the ideal. (5) Characters create their own version of possible transitions from the real to the ideal, according to their desires, by dynamizing the image. (6) Actors and observers compare experiences and observations (Boal, 2002).

This activity consists of exploring the ideology of oppression by creating group images of oppression and desires. Practicing consensus, participants create and develop characters flowing out of still body positions that emerge from their experience, and finally through movement transform an oppressive situation into a desired reality. This use of nonverbal body imagery helps a group clarify its understanding of a problem by visualizing it, and collectively explore options for resolving it; it also offers the group a powerful medium for examining stereotypes and clarifying its own vision. Other techniques similar to this one, such as “Cop in the Head” (Boal, 1995), analyze internalized oppression through more complex character development and a focus on oppressors’ tactics. As participants analyze the

mechanisms of oppression that operate in various situations, they experience how the power of oppression extends from one space to another, and how common experiences go beyond the particularities of individual stories.

Forum Theater. Forum theater is designed to maximize participation of the audience in a performance by shifting the central focus of the dramatic event from the stage to the audience. This shift occurs through the spect-actor principle. The concept refers both to a social relation and to a protagonistic function; rather than being installed into fixed roles, as in conventional theater, the spectators and actors have dual functions, mobile and reciprocal, and the theatrical action becomes one that all participants—actors and audience—can exercise. The spect-actor function is fundamental to all TO activities; in forum theater it creates a new performance mode. First, actors recognize the audience as equal performance partners from the very start; before the dramatic action starts, they play and dialogue with the audience through group integration exercises and games. Thus expansion of the aesthetic space into the audience area begins. Second, the first time an audience member interrupts the dramatic action, the focus of the performance shifts from the stage to the newly established aesthetic space comprising both stage *and* audience area; what occurs in this space is shared dramaturgy (Boal, 2002). Third, by taking on the role of protagonists of the dramatic action, audience members prepare to be protagonists of their own lives in the much broader social sphere.

In forum theater, the spect-actor role play is a vehicle for analyzing power and stimulating public debate. Participants explore the complexity of the individual-group relation at a variety of levels. They are invited to map out (1) the dynamics of power within and between groups; (2) the experience and the fear of powerlessness within the individual; and (3) rigid patterns of perception that generate miscommunication and conflict, as well as ways of transforming them. Forum theater is useful as a means of helping participants prepare for effective social action intended to transform the objective social and political realities of their community. Such actions include public forums, strikes, demonstrations, and other types of direct action.

A Community Organizing Tool

In TO, democracy is not only a vision but also a practice rooted in the daily life of oppressed people. The cultural struggle in which TO is engaged in more than seventy countries can best be understood as a liberatory project: that of actualizing processes of direct democracy. This practice, however, takes different forms according to the social and political context of the country. In Brazil, for example, Boal's Center (CTO-RIO; ctorio@ctorio.org.br) works on human rights issues with many groups in poor communities.

Long-term projects, some of which have brought about municipal legislation, have been created with slum dwellers, street children, teachers, housemaids, and mental health self-advocates. Another project, located in seven Brazilian states, has boosted the prison reform movement through a program involving both prison personnel and prisoners. The landless peasant movement (MST) now includes TO as a basic component of its organizer training.

In the Calcutta region of India, the work of the collective Jana Sanskriti has given rise to a large TO-based political movement of peasants and agricultural workers—more than twelve hundred groups—who organize around issues of hunger, unemployment, and unionizing. In Paris, an early TO center, groups presently work within immigrant communities on issues of immigrants' rights and homelessness. To consult the TO International Yellow Pages, go to www.theatreoftheoppressed.org.

The New York-based Theater of the Oppressed Laboratory (TOPLAB), which has maintained a close working relationship with Boal and CTO-Rio since 1990, has offered training to a spectrum of activists and organizers confronting numerous social issues and issues of oppression, such as housing, health care, substance abuse, HIV-AIDS, violence, racism, sexism, and discrimination based on gender orientation and ethnicity. This work has included leadership development projects in public schools such as the Renaissance School in Queens, as well as partnerships with community organizations such as Make the Road by Walking, Cabrini Immigrant Services/Justice for Immigrants Campaign at Saint Teresa's, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, Mothers on the Move, and Quilombo Summer.

Two Recent TOPLAB Community-Based Projects

The first is Make the Road by Walking (MRBW). In January 2006, TOPLAB began a working partnership with MRBW, a Brooklyn community organization that promotes economic justice and direct democracy. Members of MRBW are predominantly low-income Latino and African American residents of the Bushwick section and nearby communities. The project involved members of BASTA, MRBW's environmental and housing justice subcommittee, which primarily fights for tenant rights and increasing green space for marginalized communities in New York City.

The first phase of this partnership was a six-month facilitator training program in image and forum theater, in which MRBW was one of four participating groups. The program was designed as an "internship with practicum" whose purpose was to help participating groups create a ten-minute problem-posing forum theater skit. It consisted of a series of monthly workshops for interns—the groups' representatives—held at the Brecht Forum in Manhattan, practice sessions with the community group

and intracommunity performances held directly in the interns' respective communities, and an intercommunity theater festival.

To participate in the program, BASTA members formed the Make the Road Theater Collective. Their objective was to incorporate forum theater into their community mobilizing efforts. Members hoped to develop abilities they felt were needed to make their educational outreach and organizing campaigns more inclusive and effective: nonhierarchical leadership dynamics, self-confidence, self-activity and creativity, open dialogue, and problem-solving skills for planning actions. They also wanted to develop new perspectives on how to create fresh and playful approaches to their meetings and actions.

During the six-month period, BASTA integrated TO practices into its organizational structure, including movement, body sculpting, improvisation, creation of problem-posing plays in view of audience participation and collective strategizing, consensus, and nonauthoritarian leadership.

By strengthening their artistic capacity, BASTA members also developed fresh approaches to community action and organizational dynamics. Integration of theater into meetings and actions has made them more participatory and enjoyable and as a result has kept community members involved and attracted new members. Communication among organizers and members has also improved.

The TOPLAB partnership with MRBW is now in its second phase. A new street theater and forum theater project, coordinated by BASTA and involving other citywide environmental justice groups, has recently been formed and is developing its own working model.

The second project is the Cabrini Immigrant Services/Justice for Immigrants (JFI) Campaign at Saint Teresa's. In February 2007, TOPLAB began a partnership with the JFI Campaign at Saint Teresa's Church on New York's Lower East Side. The project has three components: (1) involvement in the campaign, (2) on-site TO workshops, and (3) cofacilitation with the JFI organizer. JFI campaign members have formed a theater collective in the hopes that TO will help create dialogue in the community between people interested in immigration reform and those who have remained uninvolved owing to lack of awareness of the issues.

The main objectives of the theater collective are to better understand the issues, form a support group, share experiences, use theater to communicate their concerns to their community, explore strategies of persuasion, and plan a short-term action. Members have also committed to working together in a spirit of confidentiality, transparency, respect for others' experiences and opinions, cooperation, and love.

The first phase of the project has consisted of creating and rehearsing a forum theater skit for the parish community. At the end of a three-month rehearsal period, community members will have performed a problem-posing skit based on images created from their experiences of immigration and of

the parish community. They will also have engaged in power analysis based on these images. The second phase of the project involves intra- and inter-community performances. A third phase involves training members of the theater collective as facilitators of image and forum theater.

Summary

The cultural practice and politics of TO consists of promoting not only social, economic, and political democracy but also democracy as a *way of life*—a way of understanding and creating everyday human relations based on values and attitudes that foster direct democracy. Understood within this context, TO helps groups and organizations engage in essential debate over strategy and process, confront the weaknesses within their own internal structure, and build a coalition with like-minded groups to work for social change.

Practiced within the popular education framework, TO simultaneously functions as a vehicle for organizing and as an integral component of the organizing process itself. Theater—the art of organizing human action in time and space—is by definition a privileged medium for examining the multidimensional structures of power and oppression, as well as for envisioning and creating new liberatory realities. When a theater practice that stresses the interdependency of its aesthetic, pedagogical, and political functions places itself in the service of organizing to achieve a democratic restructuring of society, it contributes a unique perspective on the art of organizing and community building and brings us another step closer to a just and compassionate society.

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